

To Help And To Heal

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Category: Avengers

Genre: Drama, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Black Widow/Natasha R., Hawkeye/Clint B.

Pairings: Hawkeye/Clint B./Black Widow/Natasha R.

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-04-12 07:02:43

Updated: 2016-04-12 07:02:43

Packaged: 2016-04-27 19:23:41

Rating: K

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,797

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Clint isn't supposed to fall in love with the Black Widow, but he does anyway. He isn't supposed to recruit her either, but he does that too.

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****AN:** I've been playing around with this for a while and I'm still not sure how I feel about it, but I'm posting it in honour of Clintasha Week for Day 1: Beginnings/His Call. ******

****Enjoy and please leave feedback in a review :) If people are interested I might write a companion piece for this exploring Coulson/Fury's reaction to Clint falling in love with his target.****

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><p>"Your people need to stop trying to bring me in," the blonde says. She's not really blonde, Clint knows because he's been tracking her movements across Europe for almost seven months now, but the wig is a good look on her.<p>

(Although, he's beginning to think everything is a good look on her.)

He raises his arms in the universal gesture of peace. "I'm not my people. And I'm not trying to bring you in."

Hazel eyes (again: not real) narrow beneath thick blonde lashes. "I do hope you're not going to try to kill me."

"Well, the thought did cross my mind." He shrugs one shoulder. "But then I saw you in there and I thought it would be such a shame."

Her cherry red lips curve into a delighted smile. "Is that so?"

He nods indulgently. "No one should die until they've lived a life worth remembering."

Her laugh is as musical as one would expect from a goddess of the highest caliber. He absently wonders if it's put on to match the identity of whoever she's pretending to be tonight.

"Trust me, honey," she murmurs. "I'll definitely be remembered."

His grin is all teeth. "I have no doubt of that, _honey_, but that doesn't mean your life is worth remembering."

She laughs again, less musical (less fake) this time, reaching out to trace his face with long, manicured red nails. "And how do you suggest I change that, _honey_?" she asks.

He catches her hand with his own, keeping it trapped against his skin as he reaches out to tuck a strand of blonde hair (wig) behind her ear. She gazes up at him through lowered lashes and he stares back, hand falling to rest on her arm.

"Come home with me," he says when the silence has stretched on too long and she starts to pull away.

She arches one gold-tinted eyebrow. "I thought you weren't trying to bring me in."

"You know that's not what I meant."

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips and he tries not to stare too hard. _Damn she's sexy,_ he thinks.

"Why?"

He shrugs. "It's the city of love, why not?"

She tilts her head back and he takes it as his cue to lean down, capturing her lips in a long, slow kiss. One of her arms winds around the back of his neck, the other hand slides into the back pocket of his jeans, and his fingers tangle in her silky blonde hair (wig). It's a long time before they come up for air.

"Come home with me," he proposes again, breathing the words against her lips, his face so close he can feel her (fake) lashes brush against his cheek when her eyelids flutter.

She smiles coyly and let's him lead the way.

* * *

><p>He wakes up to an empty bed and a phone number scrawled in purple ink across his chest.<p>

Don't call xx it says in printed block letters underneath.

He chuckles to himself as he types the number into his phone (saving it under 'Đ»Đ°Đ¿Đ¼Ñ†Đ°Đ°') then goes for a shower.

* * *

><p>You look stunning. Are you working?**

**Yes. What do you want? **

There's a Chinese restaurant around the corner that does takeaway. I thought we could get dinner.

Have you been following me Barton?

Of course. I'm supposed to take you out, remember?

And you're doing a fabulous job of that.

That's why I'm the best in the business.

Is that so?

Well, other than you.

Sucking up now, Barton? Flattery will get you nowhere.

That's why I offered to buy you dinner.

* * *

><p>The takeaway is average but the good company makes up for it. Her hair is a dark brown this time, almost black, and her contacts make her irises shine blue. Her dress is low-cut and short, her makeup a little too heavy, her speech a little too seductive. He wonders who she's playing as tonight. (Doesn't care to ask.)<p>

Somewhere between the Mongolian lamb and the deep-fried ice cream the food gets forgotten. She kisses him first this time, hesitant and searching, and he feels her mask beginning to crumble.

"Well at least I can put in my report that you're not one for taking it slow," he jokes.

She arches a single perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "You already bought me dinner. What more do you want?"

He lets his gaze drift around the rooftop they're sitting on; the rough concrete, the whistling air conditioning unit, the rattling pipes, the sounds of violent city life drifting up on the stale evening air. Just because he likes rooftops, doesn't mean he _likes rooftops._

"At least let me take you home first," he propositions, daring her to argue.

She doesn't. Instead, her grin is slow and flirty. "My hotel room is closer."

He doesn't bother asking how she knows where he's staying. It's less a game of cat and mouse (cops and robbers, whatever you want to call it) and more of a waltz. Only neither of them plays the woman. He leads, she leads, he pushes, she pushes back, he spins her around, she sends him twirling across the dance floor.

And somehow they always end up tangled together before the night is over. He supposes that's what happens when two people try to lead in a waltz.

* * *

><p>She's always gone in the morning. It's her modus operandi. He doesn't mind though; finding her again is part of the fun.<p>

* * *

><p>That bikini is gorgeous. Working on your tan?**

No tan. Just working.

Wow, where do you even keep a phone in that thing?

Wouldn't you like to know?

You can show me later. You know, when you're not working.

Since when do you care that I'm working?

Since the guy that's approaching you looks like he could snap me in half**. **

I just might let him.

Aw honey you wound me. If I was gone who would you lead on a merry chase across the world?

* * *

><p>The merry chase leads him to Melbourne. She's dressed down instead of up this time, wearing leggings and a sweatshirt one size too big, sitting in the corner of a coffee shop with a mug of tea and a thick paperback open on the table. He orders a cappuccino and claims the empty seat.<p>

"Never took you for a Hemingway fan," he comments, peering at the familiar black and white cover of For Whom the Bell Tolls.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Barton," she replies, gaze not moving from the open page in front of her.

"We could change that."

She sighs, marks her page and sets the book aside, stares out the window at the busy street. He takes a sip of his cappuccino, wincing when it burns his tongue, and just watches her, wondering at the thoughts that dance through her mind.

"I don't like rockmelon," she says eventually, voice barely audible amongst the chatter in the coffee shop. "My favourite novel is Anna Karenina, I've never tried lobster but I'd like to, and I think Nicholas Cage has as much acting ability as a broomstick."

It's the only personal information he's ever gotten out of her. Sure, he knows things that he's learnt from files and from watching her from a distance, but this is the first information she's volunteered herself. And so what if it's trivial details; everything means something when it comes to her.

He holds his breath, waiting for more, but nothing else comes. She finishes her tea and stands up, offering him a hand. "Why don't we go back to my place?" she offers. "And you can tell me about yourself."

"Like there's anything you don't know already," he retorts, but he takes her hand anyway and lets her lead him out of the coffee shop and down the street.

* * *

><p>That night they talk. More than the trivial details from the coffee shop; hopes, dreams, fears, jobs - the stuffing that makes up their reputable names. She tells him the story behind each of the scars he traces with gentle fingers and in return he tells her about life in the circus. She tells him about her own childhood in the Red Room - being handcuffed to the bed at night, being chained to a chair in a locked closet and told to find her way out by morning, being tied up and tortured by people she thought were her friends because she dared to defy an order - and he stops wondering why she has trust issues.<p>

"I'll never let that happen to you again," he swears, eyes bright and serious in the moonlight that creeps through curtains. "I promise I'll help you find something better than this shitty life if it's the last thing I do."

Her smile is small and sad. "Don't make promises you can't keep, honey."

* * *

><p>He's not surprised that she isn't there when he wakes up in the morning.<p>

He is when she returns five minutes later with coffees and muffins.

* * *

><p>"I'm still not going home with you."<p>

"I know."

"I mean it, Barton."

"I know."

"Then why do you keep coming back?"

"The same reason you keep letting me find you."

* * *

><p>Bangkok, Santiago, Kiev, Copenhagen, Mumbai. She runs, he follows. She hides, he seeks. And every time, he knows he only finds her because she lets him.<p>

Then Kyoto. This time he's the one running (and no, Coulson, it's not his fault that he pissed off the Yakuza... again) and she's the one who shows up on his doorstep out of the blue. He hides, she seeks. And he knows that she finds him not because he lets her but because she wants to.

"Okay," she says. They're holed up in a cottage in a town beside the Katsura River, playing Go Fish with a deck of cards she picked up somewhere along the way.

"Okay?" he asks, thrown by the non sequitur. He studies his hand. "Got any aces?"

She plucks one out and tosses it across the table. "You obviously can't keep out of trouble by yourself," she elaborates, then: "Got any threes?"

"Go fish." He frowns at the cards in his hand. "Got any nines?"

"Go fish."

He reaches for the pile in the middle of table. "So, what? You're going to stick around and keep me out of trouble yourself?"

"That depends," she smirks. "Have you got any queens?"

He flicks the card at her. "You can be my queen of hearts any day, honey."

The beginning of a frown hides behind her laugh. "Careful, Barton," she reproves. "You're starting to sound possessive."

And he gets the underlying message loud and clear. _Too many people have owned me, you don't get to be one of them._

"Like you'd let me," he tells her seriously. _I promised you an escape from that life. And I always keep my promises. "_Got any eights?"

"Fish." She smiles. Real and beautiful. Maybe that is the moment he realises how truly head over heels he is. "Well, any good queen needs a king..."

He grumbles as he hands her the last card in his hand. Is it possible for one to cheat at Go Fish?

* * *

><p>After they take down the Yakuza sect who come after him ("You don't have to be bait-" "Yes I do" "No, you-" "I've dealt with these dekisokonai _before-" "So have I-" "Let me help dammit, Barton!"_), Clint tosses her a t-shirt and a set of handcuffs. She raises an eyebrow. He arches one in return.

The t-shirt gets pulled on over the top of her shredded tank top (damn Yakuza swords). The handcuffs get tossed back to him.

He sighs, opens his mouth to explain that Fury will have his head if he takes her in without at least some acknowledgement of formal procedure, but her next words shock him into silence.

"I want you to do it."

He's sure his jaw is scraping the floor. "Why?"

Her expression is calm, not quite open but not as closed off as it has been in the past. "I need to know I can trust you."

And Clint knows his life experiences are far from normal but that is all kinds of messed up. What the fuck did that Red Room place do to her? More importantly: how can he fix it?

"I've told you-"

"Well forgive me if I don't take your word for it," she retorts. Fair enough; he was sent to kill her all those months ago (God, is it years now? Feel like yesterday).

He takes the wrist she holds out, gently, hesitantly, watching her face carefully to make sure it really is alright. To make sure she knows he's really not okay with this. She doesn't get impatient, just holds his gaze and stays completely still. Clint clicks the second cuff shut and steps back. She follows, stretching up on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek.

"Thank you," she says.

He just shakes his head. "Thank me when I take them off."

* * *

><p>"You disobeyed a direct order, Agent Barton."<p>

"With all due respect, sir, no I didn't."

"Your order were to neutralise the threat."

"And I did. She works for us now, ergo she's no longer a threat. Threat neutralised; orders completed. Can I go grab a shower now?"

* * *

><p>Not even Fury can deny that SHIELD looks good on her. In fact, if Clint is being entirely honest, the catsuit looks more than good on her. (He wonders idly how much better it would look in a pile on the floor.)<p>

"So we're partner now?" she asks him once they're alone in her new quarters.

He shrugs. "Guess so."

Red fingernails skim along the bedcover, across the bedside table, along the cupboard doors that hide rows of shelves and drawers. Clint leans back against the closed door and watches her explore the tiny space - _her_ tiny space. He wonders whether it's the first proper

place she's been able to call her own.

"And does SHIELD-" Her tongue rolls around the word, like it's still foreign and bitter tasting. "-have rules about fraternising?"

"Not ones I care about."

"Good." Her smile is warm, gaze sharp and clear, telling him she chose SHIELD for him but she won't choose it over him. Then she's crossing the room and trapping him against the door, kissing him hungrily, reaching behind him to click the lock into place even as he steers her towards the bed. Her knees hit the metal bed frame with a soft thump and she's falling back, pulling him with her.

But he hesitates. He wants this and he knows she wants it too, but he needs to know that this isn't all she wants. If she only joined SHIELD because she chose him as the one person in the world to see past her outer walls, then he'll spend all day every day feeling guilty for trapping her in another life she didn't want. He doesn't want to be another of her captors; he wants to be the one who looked at her, saw someone other than the Black Widow, then helped her find that person again.

"Clint." Her voice is quiet but insistent, her expression open and her eyes honest. She isn't hiding from him or lying to him anymore. "I chose this."

And he gets everything she isn't sure how to say. She didn't choose SHIELD because she chose him, she chose SHIELD as well as choosing him. It's not just an escape, it's a new beginning, a chance to step out of the shell that was Natalya Romanova and become Natasha Romanoff instead.

Clint is honoured that she wants him to be part of that.

* * *

><p>AN: Translations:

Д»Д°Д¿Д¾Ñ‡Д°Д° (Russian) - honey

dekisokonai (Japanese) - assholes

End
file.